



A FEAST FOR THE SENSES

Broadway production of *The Lion King* brings something new to Disney's animated classic

I have a confession: I never really liked *The Lion King*. As a child of the '90s and subsequently Disney's Renaissance period, I was obsessed with every princess, magic carpet and talking candlestick holder, but I had no love for the coming-of-age boy-king of Pride Rock.

What can I say? *Hamlet* rip-offs just didn't appeal to my tween sensibilities.

Nevertheless, I jumped at the opportunity to see one of Broadway's longest running and most critically revered musicals, right here in Eugene at the Hult Center. Even the *Eugene Weekly*'s own curmudgeonly Grandpa Rick Levin was in attendance — but I didn't see any bells on him.

Julie Taymor's stage adaptation of *The Lion King* is both everything and nothing like the original movie. The story is largely the same: a young lion prince's journey to becoming the one true ruler of the Savannah, despite the plotting of his villainous and oddly British uncle.

But there all resemblance evolves into a stunning exhibition of imagination. It isn't a musical as much it is an open storybook leaping off of the page and onto the stage.

The opening scene at Pride Rock is total eye and ear candy. Giraffes, cheetahs, zebras and birds all come together for the birth of their new king, while Rafiki (Buyi Zama) ceremonially leads the ensemble in "Circle of Life." Zama's voice — along with lyricists Elton John and Tim Rice's unlikely pairing with Lebo M.'s bellowing African drums — are the stuff of goose bumps, powerful and soul-penetrating.

Taymor's costume and puppet design — done in collaboration with Michael Curry, whose shop is in Scappoose — draws on a number of cultural influences, from Japanese

puppetry to the more obvious African roots. There's even a slight element of Mad Max in the stomping hooves of the creepy and comedic hyenas.

Shadow puppets, gazelles on slow-moving steam punk bicycle tires, 20-foot giraffes on stilts, all exemplify a playfulness with storytelling that brings to life a world — a world that now seems flat in its original animated form. The mechanic yet fluid movements of the masks, which never fully cover the faces of the actors, emphasize the strange duality between man and beast.

The pride-lands and jungle are constantly in motion. Garth Fagan's choreography spans a number of dance forms from African to ballet, to modern, resulting in a hypnotic experience of the senses. Who knew swaying grass could be so entertaining?

Likewise, the scenic and lighting design of Richard Hudson and Donald Holder are masterful displays of texture and color. The golden rising and setting sun radiate warmth out of the African plains. The late second act performance of "He Lives In You" is an especially impressive display of light and movement.

Added musical numbers, such as "Shadow Land" and "Endless Night," infuse a level of feeling that goes beyond a children's movie in what is indisputably Disney's darkest tale.

If the guttural emotion in Simba's journey didn't move you the first go-around, or even if it did, the theatrical experience is sure to invoke something within even the most cynical, if only an appreciation for the highly creative elements at play. *The Lion King* is an experience not to be missed. ■

The Lion King continues its run Jan. 18-20 at the Hult Center; information and tickets available at hultcenter.org.

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